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Too many Soviet spies here

Just as the Walker family spy case caused the Reagan administration and the U.S. Congress to take a whole new look at the number and quality of security clearances, so the widening revelations flowing from the defection in London of KGB chief Oleg Gordievski have increased the pressure to cut the size of the official Soviet-bloc presence in the United States and to control it much more closely.

In calling for the expulsion to date of 31 Soviet intelligence officers fingered by Mr. Gordievski, the British government has thrown a harsh, revealing light on the wide variety of cover arrangements that the KGB uses to confuse its enemies. Among the Russian officials expelled were seven diplomats, eight trade representatives, six journalists, one military attache, and a mix of embassy staffers and translators for international organizations.

Since this is presumably only the tip of the iceberg of what Mr. Gordievski has been able to tell the British in his years of duty as a double agent, American intelligence officials are wondering how many agents the KGB chief in Washington

would be able to identify if he decided to defect like his London colleague.

Of a total Soviet-bloc population of more than 2,500 officials in the United States, the best guess is that more than 1,000 are serving under effective KGB control in the embassies and U.N. missions of the Soviet bloc and acting as trade representatives, journalists, and international civil servants.

This potential agent population of official Soviet-bloc personnel has been allowed to grow like Topsy since the halcyon days of detente in the early 1970s. Both Reagan officials and key committees in Congress now recognize that the problem is out of hand, and after Mr. Gordievski's revelations even the

State Department is prepared to admit the need for radical changes.

FBI agents have the almost impossible task of keeping track of hundreds of Soviet-bloc officials serving in scores of separate offices in the New York-Washington area, and they share a set of immediate priorities.

First, they would like to see the total number of Soviet officials allowed into this country sharply reduced to some kind of rough parity with the American official presence in Russia. They welcomed the passage on July 30 of the amendment sponsored by Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Sen. William Cohen, R-Maine, that gives the administration six months to produce a plan for equalizing the size of the Soviet Embassy in Washington and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

The presence of the headquarters of the United Nations in New York, combined with the membership in that organization of both the Soviet Union and the Eastern European satellites, gives the KGB unique cover possibilities that it has exploited to the hilt. With 300 staffers, the Soviet Mission to the U.N. is twice the size of any other, and it should be sharply cut back.

The Soviet citizens serving as international civil servants in the U.N. Secretariat presented in the past a special problem. Unlike Russian diplomats, they were not subject to a 25-mile travel limit, and they did not have to make travel reservations through State's Office of Foreign Missions. This license to recruit agents freely throughout the country has now been revoked by an amendment sponsored by Sen. William Roth, R-Del., and Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill. As of this week, Soviet citizens on the U.N. staff are subject to the same travel restrictions as Soviet diplomats.

But intelligence officials are quick to point out that a gaping loophole remains to be closed. The Polish, Czech, and East German officials serving in this country as diplomats and as U.N. staff members are under no travel restrictions whatsoever. They are free to escape FBI surveillance and to recruit and service agents under close KGB supervision. Sen. Roth's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations will have this problem high on its agenda when it meets in October.

Finally, there is a silver lining to this cloud of KGB activity. As the Gordievski case indicates, the new breed of KGB officials is susceptible to ideological defection, and a number of recent KGB defectors now in the United States under the protection of total anonymity are further evidence that the Soviets have a generational problem on their hands.

The younger KGB officers are better educated than their predecessors, but they lack ideological conviction, and in their service abroad they see the gap between Western reality and Soviet propaganda.

For all their careful planning and elaborate cover arrangements, a series of high-level defections like Mr. Gordievski's could leave the KGB shaken, its secrets exposed, and its agents compromised. But it is too early to count on such an outcome, and in the meantime the official Soviet-bloc presence in the United States should be drastically reduced.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.